

Georgia Institute of Technology  
School of History, Technology, and Society

**The Navajo Concept of Wind**

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Della Hall  
History, Technology, and Society

Dr. Douglas Flammig  
Professor of History  
School of History, Technology, and Society

Dr. Steven Usselman  
Professor of History  
School of History, Technology, and Society

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## Introduction

While researching Navajo Wind at University of New Mexico's Center for Southwest Research, I had the opportunity to speak with a Navajo woman working there. In my conversations with her, she mentioned that my research topic of Navajo Wind was a complex one, one that even she – a Navajo herself – did not fully understand. This bolstered my resolve to learn why a gust of wind, which is little more than a natural element to most, symbolizes much more when it blows over the land of the Navajo reservation. It is in this southwestern American Indian tribe's traditions that the lowercased "wind" is able to become the capitalized "Wind." In Navajo language, wind is most commonly referred to as "*nilch'i*." Simply put, *nilch'i* may be translated as "the wind,"<sup>1</sup> or as "holy wind."<sup>2</sup> But that minimal translation does not capture the word's full meaning. For the Navajo, *nilch'i* is "the source of the means of life."<sup>3</sup> It represents not only a god, or holy person, but also a means of communication, the act of breathing, and every Navajo's soul. This abstract concept, different from any facet of modern cultures – religious or otherwise – needs to be defined, simplified, and illuminated.

Although the existing scholarship on the Navajo is bountiful, the key element of Wind in their society has been unusually overlooked. Nearly all writings on the Navajo mention this concept, and some delve into the topic, but none have fully defined and explained the idea. To fill this gap, one author has contributed an important study of *nilch'i*. James Kale McNeley's *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* is an impressive

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<sup>1</sup> The Franciscan Fathers, *Ethnologic Dictionary of the Navajo Language* (New York: Ams Press, 1983), 46.

<sup>2</sup> James K. McNeley, *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Sam D. Gill and Irene Sullivan, *Dictionary of Native American Mythology* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1992), 217.

analysis of Navajo Wind, but it leaves much to be questioned. First, McNeley discusses the sources of light, life, and thought in Navajo ideologies, but does not go into a complete analysis of the origin legend – a basis of Navajo culture and therefore an important theme in the literature. He also does not discuss the pattern of the “personification” of wind – though many of his sources describe wind incarnate or performing a human action. Surprisingly, McNeley scarcely mentions the Whirlwindway healing ceremony, which should be a strong point in his argument. Additionally, he does not reflect on *real* wind in the geological area of the Navajo reservation. While his analysis does contain solid arguments, it lacks the detailed consideration of various topics that could synthesize his study. Clearly Wind is important to the Navajo, thereby creating a need for the literature to be reinforced with a comprehensive analysis of the idea. In this paper, I aim to expand upon McNeley’s ideas. Without a synthesized writing on the topic of Wind in the Navajo perspective, our grasp on Navajo culture is incomplete. This piece will fill this gap in the literature by focusing on Wind in Navajo life and by creating a complete account that is comprehensible to Western society.

For the purposes of these writings, a few terms must be clarified. From this point forward, the Navajo concept of Wind will be referred to as either the capitalized “Wind” or “*nilch’i*.” Another important term to define is “Western society.” In this paper, Western society is defined as American and European cultures based on Christianity. Previous scholarship and accounts by Navajo people will require a basis for comparison in Western Society as we examine the Navajo traditions.

Placing Navajo Wind in the spotlight, rather than using it in a supporting role for other arguments, yields several benefits. At the most basic level, it reveals the importance

of Wind in the Navajo universe. The first-hand accounts drawn upon in this essay highlight the significance of *nilch'i* to the Navajo worldview and illustrate the degree to which previous scholars have failed to capture this significance. It seems almost an insult to the Navajo to ignore this element that has infiltrated their culture so completely. Exploring the real wind, religion, depiction, and life ideologies of the Navajo will reveal the magnitude of Wind to the Navajo, which has been thus far undervalued in Navajo scholarship.

### **The Navajo and *Dinetah***

In order to begin to understand Wind, one must begin to understand the Navajo. The Navajo are a major Native American Indian group. The word Navajo means “planted fields” in the Tewa language,<sup>4</sup> but the Navajo call themselves “Diné,” meaning “the People.”<sup>5</sup> They have been a part of North American history from its early stages. The Navajo people reside in the area of the Four Corners – where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet at 90-degree angles – as can be seen in Figure 1. Chiefly in Arizona, the current reservation stretches a bit into New Mexico and Utah as well. They call their land “*Dinetah*,” meaning “among the people.”

Approximately five hundred years ago, Navajo ancestors migrated south from what is now Canada to the region that is their land today. In the 1800s, white Americans seeking to expand westward territorially challenged the Navajo for their land. The Navajo were forced off of their land in the 1860s, and relocated to a Western part of New Mexico

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<sup>4</sup> Tewa is a language spoken by the Pueblo American Indians.

<sup>5</sup> Barry M. Pritzker, *A Native American Encyclopedia: History, Culture, and Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 51.

at Fort Sumner. This imposed trek is known today as the Long Walk. In 1868, the United States government allowed them to return to their land and created what is today the Navajo Indian Reservation.<sup>6</sup> Today, they are the most populous Indian tribe in America, and they continue to grow: In 1990, there were 144,000 Navajo Indians on the reservation plus thousands outside of it, in comparison to the 1800s, when there were a mere 6,000 Navajo people.<sup>7</sup> By 2002, the Navajo population grew to more than 290,000.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the moves and population growth, the Navajo have maintained their customs and beliefs.

One explanation for the significance the Navajo place on wind stems from the land on which they live. The *real* wind in *Dinetah* is somewhat different than what most people in the United States experience on a daily basis. Winds that sometimes carry sand at high speeds are constantly blowing.<sup>9</sup> Life in this extreme environment could very likely influence its people to revere the elements. It is conceivable that the environment would impact the Navajo – a people who rely on herding and planting for survival – dramatically.

As can be seen in the Figures 2-4, *Dinetah* is nearly entirely a low-wind area. However, shown is an area of wind power density of class level 5 (winds up to 14.3 miles per hour), inside the boundaries of their reservation on the border of New Mexico and Arizona (See Figure 2). The mountains help protect their land from this strong wind, but

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Iverson, *The Navajos* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Pritzker, *A Native American Encyclopedia*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Iverson, *Diné: A History of the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2002), 1.

<sup>9</sup> John T. Hack, "Dunes of the Western Navajo Country," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 31, No. 2, April. pp. 240-263. (American Geographical Society, 1941) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/210206>, 245.

where there is a break in the mountains, the wind breaks through creating a wind tunnel. In a culture that relies heavily on crop growth for survival, knowledge of wind patterns is imperative. To demonstrate the impact this has on Navajo people, one Navajo exhibits his acquired knowledge in this revealing statement: “It is Morning Butte. When the wind blows, you could hear it. Every time the wind blows, or the wind is going to blow, that butte there you will hear sounds from it. That is when you know there is going to be a windstorm.”<sup>10</sup> With the impending threat of a windstorm that could blow in at any minute, this Navajo, Alvin Clinton, has learned to forecast the weather to prepare and protect himself by his own learned means of interpreting the land. But sometimes knowing the wind patterns is not enough in *Dinetah*; the wind can be overpowering. Another Navajo, Jeanette Denny, demonstrates this by saying, “If the wind won’t stop, if the wind gets too strong that it is where we talk to the creator.”<sup>11</sup> When a natural element that is on average bearable suddenly dominates every aspect of peoples’ lives, they can turn to only what they know – religious explanation. By defining wind as a god, the Navajo are able to justify the good conditions and the bad.

Wind influences their culture in modern ways as well. The Navajo are now able to utilize the power of their Wind god for good – by way of windmills.<sup>12</sup> Not only have the Navajo learned to harness the wind with windmills, but it has also become part of their

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<sup>10</sup> Alvin Clinton, interview, transcript, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 2, folder 51), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanette Denny, interview, Tape L, Side I, pg. 3, transcript, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 2, folder 51), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>12</sup> Seguni Begay, *The Navajos*. Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute Documents (MSS 442 BC, box 1, folder 5), Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

way of life. This way of life depends on the exact conditions and surroundings of their environs. Knowledge of the land and the best way to live in *Dinetah* is so important that it has spread to other aspects of their customs as well.

One aspect impacted by this lifestyle is the Navajo feeling of safety. For example: “The Navajo, who identified a sacred mountain at each cardinal point, tied specific landscape features to different winds that manifested in the human body in different functional capacities. From the four cardinal mountains the Holy People sent winds that provided guidance, instruction, and strength.”<sup>13</sup> These mountains are considered protection to the Navajo. Without the lands on which they live, the Navajo lack a connection to their gods, including Wind. The natural boundaries also protect their basin of land from the elements. When bad weather does make it through the barriers, the Navajo believe the gods are causing it, and they pray to them.

The protection that the mountains provide is explained not only by their holy characteristics, but by their physical dimensions as well. The Navajo consider the four sacred mountains to be like the posts of a hogan,<sup>14</sup> and the other two mountains to be like the doorposts to the hogan.<sup>15</sup> But it is not just that the mountains create a safe home – the Navajo believe that the gods put them on their lands, and in order to continue to receive their protection, they must remain there. Alvin Clinton explains, “Besides the sacred mountains there are other gods that live in the sacred mountains and also there is a wind

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<sup>13</sup> Chris Low and Elizabeth Hsu, “Introduction,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Mar. 2007 Supplement, Vol. 13, p. S1-S17 (Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2007) <http://www.library.gatech.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=24815076&site=ehost-live>, S7.

<sup>14</sup> A Hogan is the traditional home of the Navajo people.

<sup>15</sup> Mae Wilson Tso, interview, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 1, folder 1), para. 6. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.



god that is guarding the buttes, all the way around the Four Sacred Mountains. These holy people protect the Navajo nation and the people must continue to live in this area because it is our safety and like a house, you live in a house and you are protected from the wind, and the cold, and everything. These buttes, these sacred mountains, they are our home.”<sup>16</sup> From this quote one can infer why the Navajo were so highly affected by the Long Walk as well as the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute.<sup>17</sup> To the Navajo, leaving their land was a jarring experience, because it left them feeling unsafe and unprotected. They lacked the connection to their gods, or protectors, through *Dinetah*.

To demonstrate the sheer attachment the Navajo have to their land, we can analyze the interviews of Navajo people impacted by the Navajo-Hopi-Land Dispute. During the dispute, Pahi, a Navajo who was interviewed, had this to say: “...this is why I don’t want to move, I know all of these things and I know that they are our protections. If we just ask the earth to protect us I know that she will answer, and our mountain lands, our mountains are very sacred, and they are very powerful. With this we cannot just look and then leave the land, we have to think about all of these things before we even think about moving.”<sup>18</sup> This idea is something foreign to most of Western culture. People uproot and relocate so often in America today, most people never experience this

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<sup>16</sup> Alvin Clinton, Teesto, interview, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 2, folder 2) pg. 4. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>17</sup> The Navajo-Hopi Land dispute was a result of the U.S. government’s creation of reservations, which caused disputes between the Navajo and the Hopi over encroachment. This was made worse by the “Bennet Freeze” in which the U.S. government mandated that the Navajo and the Hopi could not build in the contested area until a decision by the government could be made.

<sup>18</sup> Pahi, interview, side 2 tape 32-c, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC box 2 folder 66), pg 2. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

connection to a stretch of land. Pahi continued to explain this phenomena: “I don’t think that you will understand it anyway but he names all the four sacred, mountains and all, everything that represented like the winds from the north, the sky from the west...”<sup>19</sup> In this, Pahi is attempting to explain this type of connection to *Dinetah*, but it is one that he believes Western society cannot possibly comprehend. *Dinetah* is believed to be the place of the origin of the Navajo, and the place they must continue to dwell because their gods put them there (and will only continue to protect them as long as they remain). It is for this reason that the winds of the area, along with other natural forces such as the sun and the clouds, became gods to the Navajo.

One issue with this logic is the fact that the Navajo did not always live where they do currently – they migrated there over hundreds of years. So when did their “origin” story come into being, if not at their origins? If their origins can change, and so can their stories, then what of Wind and their understanding of it? This could be the reason some Navajo people do not fully understand Wind – because of its inconcrete nature.

### **Wind in Religion**

The gods of Navajo religion play a part in the story that tells of their beginnings: the Navajo Origin Myth. Origin Myths vary slightly in versions of the origin story, but all have common themes. Stanley A. Fishler’s “In the Beginning: A Navaho Creation Myth” and A. M. Stephen’s “Navajo Origin Legend” both tell the story of a few specific characters interacting with natural elements such as Sun, Wind, and Mountains, as well as different animals, such as the Coyote and Gopher. Fishler and Stephen’s versions both

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1.

tell of a long journey that involves Man learning lessons from the Sun and Wind “gods,” or “holy people,” and of interacting with the land and its creatures. Both versions of the myth consist of several individual stories, chants, and songs that are linked together to form the Origin Myth.

Wind is a common character throughout all versions of the Origin Myth. It is portrayed as a kind of god, a guide (or mentor), a messenger, and a mischief-maker. These Winds, though they are all different and act independently, are considered one interconnected Wind to the Navajo. From the beginning, wind plays a prominent role in the Origin story:

The Navajo...perceive life to have emerged from two winds in the lower worlds, a white wind and a dark blue wind, which existed in Earth's veins or roots. Male white wind lay on top of female dark wind, intermingled in the manner of sexual intercourse, and thereby generated Earth, Sky, and the plants, animals and peoples of the lower world. The two winds gave these forms the breath of life and the powers of behaviour and thought. At a later period these manifestations of life moved up to the earth's surface accompanied by the winds. These winds were placed in the east and south, and the two further cardinal winds were placed alongside them.<sup>20</sup>

This, being the origin story, is likely one of the first stories a Navajo learns about his or her culture. That being the case, it can be assumed that early on in life Navajo people are taught to respect the Wind god, as well as the real wind.

Perhaps the most prominent role Wind plays in the Origin Story is to dry the land. The story, as told by two Navajo women, tells that “the insect people and the animal beings called upon the Wind People to dry out the earth. The earth was not stable at that time, there was no definition – only water life. Water people lived there. They called on

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<sup>20</sup> Low, “Introduction,” S3-4.

the Wind Beings and the Wind People dried out the earth.”<sup>21</sup> Wind was blowing for seven days and nights.<sup>22</sup> There are many stories of a “great flood” in most religions and histories of the world, so it should come as no surprise that the Navajo have this in their culture as well. The Navajo origin story is just one traditional account that exhibits the significance of Wind in their culture.

Another important legend in Navajo religion is the story of the Creation of Man. Wind is again a key player in this story. Man, it is said in Navajo legend, was created by Changing Woman. It is said that

Changing Woman scraped cuticle from various parts of her body and wetting it with saliva and an infusion of four plants fashioned the image of a man, with prayer and song. Then she put Wind People into him to make him move, telling each Wind how it should work in the body. In the spirals on the ends of the thumb and fingers are located the Winds which move the legs and feet, black Wind on the thumb, blue on the forefinger, yellow on the middle finger, white on the third, spotted on the little finger. These Winds stay in the body directing its movements until death and then emerge through the spirals. Then there is one big Wind which goes through the body and comes out through the hair whorl on the back of head (or goes in through the hair whorl and comes out of the mouth). This one governs speech. This is the good part of a person, it is part of the sun or dawn and looks like light, and goes back to the sun, etc. at death. It has two names, *be' ʔi' ná' ní'* (by means of which there is life) and *be' ndiʒihi'* (by means of which one breathes). This life principle plus the breath factor makes man.<sup>23</sup>

This idea, though seemingly unique, is not unlike many creation stories of different cultures. In Christianity, God creates Adam, and creates Eve from his rib bone. This is

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<sup>21</sup> Betty Tso and Lenore Hopkins, interview, May 29, 1987, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC box 2 folder 81). Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>22</sup> Manuelito Begay, interview, tape 180 side 2, Nov 1968, American Indian Oral History Collection (Reel Mfm 1), pg 19. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>23</sup> Leland C. Wyman, W.W. Hill, and Iva Osanai, *Navajo Eschatology* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1942), 14-15.

not unlike creating man from Changing Woman's cuticle. Also, the concept of a wind inside the body can easily be compared to the idea of a soul, which will be discussed later on.

When thinking of Navajo religion, it is important to first throw away all preconceptions of what makes a religion. In an interview, Mae Wilson Tso, a Navajo woman, explains: "Our religion is not like a large organization. We don't have a building where we all gather to pray like a church. Our religion is very much different from the white man's religion. We still have our traditional ways. We still are continuing our forefather's teachings and instructions that have been passed down. We have been instructed to continue in this way. We cannot leave the land where the Creator placed us."<sup>24</sup> Once one begins to understand this different view of religious experience, it is possible to further understand Navajo Wind. Navajo religion is different in that it involves a connection to the land and all of nature. Prayer is an important facet because their climate, to which they are essentially praying, can so easily affect their lives.

Mae Wilson Tso continues to explain her religion by saying, "When you make an offering for your children, you tell the Creator, the spiritual beings, the winded beings, the plants and Mother Earth, that your children are among them, and ask for guides so that they may grow up in a good way. In return, they know that the children are there among them. Then the children are known from the Creator, spiritual beings, the winded beings, plants, Mother Earth, and from the four-legged beings, as well as all other

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<sup>24</sup> Mae Wilson Tso, interview, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 1, folder 1), para. 30. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

beings.”<sup>25</sup> Seemingly, the Navajo have many beings to which they pray, one of which is Wind. Prayer is an important part of Navajo life because their gods are surrounding them, visibly, at all times through nature. Another Navajo named Pahi explains what prayer means to him: “When you pray you ask your Mother, the Earth – it is also your Grandmother – and the Universe is your Father and your Grandfather. You pray to these things and ask them that you will live in harmony with the earth and with whatever grows on there that surrounds you or whatever that lives there like animals and livestock. And then you pray to the wind and the rain – the power of the wind and the thunder and the sound of the rain – these are considered as holy people. These people will listen to you. This is how you pray.”<sup>26</sup>

It is also through prayer and ritual that the Navajo experience a sense of community: “Ritual is...an absorbing activity, a cure-all for affliction, and an indispensable opportunity for social intercourse.”<sup>27</sup> Like in most religions, the Navajo benefit from theirs through the social interactions it encourages. The Navajo rely so much on the land for their religion, and on their religion for their way of life, that the land is a part of their way of life. During the lengthy Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute, this defense was made on behalf of the Navajo: “When you relocate these people, you are not only taking

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<sup>25</sup> Mae Wilson Tso, interview, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 1, folder 1), para. 14. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>26</sup> Pahi (Medicine Man), interview, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC, box 2, folder 56), pg 2. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>27</sup> Gladys A. Reichard, “Human Nature as Conceived by the Navajo Indians,” *The Review of Religion* (May 1943), pg 353.

away their day to day life, but you're also taking away their religion."<sup>28</sup> The Navajo pray to the Wind People because they carry their prayers and offerings to the Holy People, providing access to power and assistance.<sup>29</sup> Due to its useful makeup, it is no wonder that the Navajo pray to Wind.

While wind does all of this, it is also the Creator in many stories. In Sam D. Gill and Irene Sullivan's book, *Wind*, as a person, created the Universe, and then emerged along with its creations from the lower worlds and continues to provide the means of life; the spiral patterns on fingertips are evidence of Wind's continuing presence.<sup>30</sup> Belief in a god as creator who continues to influence humanity is hardly unique to the Navajo. But to imagine god in the form of wind, rather than the form of a human-like figure, sets Navajo religion apart from Western religion and underscores, yet again, the importance of Wind at the very core of the Navajo belief system. To explain the Navajo's connection to their surroundings, one Navajo named Peggy Scott had this to say: "I'm going to start with the four major elements that I'm sure many people are aware of and I know the scientists are aware of it which is the earth, the air, the sunlight and water which are the four basic elements.... What the Navaho's call the foundation of life."<sup>31</sup> For the Navajo, Air, or Wind, is so central to the basis of life, that they revere it. Of course, other major cultures have emphasized the four major elements in their religions and superstitions. But the

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<sup>28</sup> Percy Deal, interview, Nov. 14, 1980, Tape II, side B, Navajo Hopi Land Dispute Documents (MSS 442 BC box 3, folder 22), pg 22. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>29</sup> "Land and Religion at Big Mountain," Navajo Hopi Land Dispute Documents (MSS 442 BC, box 1, folder 5), pg 10. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>30</sup> Gill, *Dictionary*, 217.

<sup>31</sup> Peggy Scott, interview, April 23, 1981, Tape 1 side A, Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute Documents (MSS 442 BC, box 3, folder 22), pg 5. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

Navajo vision of Wind as god and creator is a more fundamental connection to one key element – and suggests that we need to develop a deeper understanding of the role of wind in Navajo religion.

The Navajo also view Wind as an essential element in healing ceremonies called Windways. A windway ceremony, as told by the Navajo, Tahi, "...is a healing ceremony. They call it the Life Way too, that too. It is healing the bone or somebody's badly hurt. I cannot go on further. I cannot tell you these things if nothing's wrong."<sup>32</sup> This quote is extremely revealing. This ceremony is very sacred to the Navajo – so sacred that Tahi refuses to explain it. The Navajo strongly believe in this method of healing. They believe that the Wind is a part of your life at all times, and if you have upset the Wind or had some encounter with a bad wind, you may need this ceremony to, in a sense, reset your life wind. For example, in the article, "The Whole Universe is My Cathedral: A Contemporary Navajo Spiritual Synthesis," Sister Grace needs a Whirlwindway ceremony because of a possible whirlwind that she experienced earlier in her life, which may have created an imbalance contributing to some of her "past mental and spiritual turmoil."<sup>33</sup> The content of these ceremonies, since it is sacred, is vaguely described in most literature. They last five days and nights, and consist of "continuous healing events."<sup>34</sup>

Another known aspect of these ceremonies is the use of sand paintings. Leland Wyman evaluates how the Navajo portray Wind through sand paintings in his book, *The*

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<sup>32</sup> Tahi, interview, Sacred Lands Project Collection (MSS 617 BC box 2, folder 68), pg 10. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>33</sup> David H. Begay and Nancy C. Maryboy, "The Whole Universe is My Cathedral: A Contemporary Navajo Spiritual Synthesis," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Blackwell Publishing, Dec. 2000), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/649718>, 508.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 508.



*Windways of the Navajo*. Using the Windway sand paintings at the Taylor Museum at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, he discusses the Windway ceremony, then presents photos of the sand paintings referenced in detail throughout.<sup>35</sup> These photos are interesting because they show winds flowing out of parts of the body just as is described in much of the Navajo literature, and they demonstrate the ideas of color being used to symbolize directions and connotations of wind, which will be explained further shortly. These sand paintings depict the Wind People and the ceremony, and are an important component of the Windways.

### **Depiction of Wind**

Windway ceremonies are not the only instance in which the Navajos personify Wind. Wind's likeness is most often associated with its mischievous nature, communicative abilities, and physical appearance. Wind is mischievous in the Hail Chant, when the Winds borrow Talking God's mask and do not return it.<sup>36</sup> The mischievous nature is sometimes viewed in a positive light. For example, the Winds "are in a sense the personification of deception, for they whisper the answers to examination questions their protégés would otherwise fail."<sup>37</sup> In fact, "in contrast to his destructive or mischievous characteristic, Wind is said to be without fault."<sup>38</sup> Although Wind tends to cause trouble, it does not do so intentionally – Wind simply "reports without considering

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<sup>35</sup> Leland C. Wyman, *The Windways of the Navajo* (Colorado Springs, CO: The Taylor Museum of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1962).

<sup>36</sup> Gladys A. Reichard, *Navajo Religion: A Study of Symbolism* (New York: Bolligen Foundation, 1950), 188.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.

whether news will have good or bad effects.”<sup>39</sup> So Wind, in effect, could be viewed as a blabbermouth, or one who has stuck his foot in his mouth. The Navajo, as with the wind soul, are able to “blame” blunders on this characteristic of wind.

Wind is sometimes a “Guardian Wind”<sup>40</sup>, and often a form of communication: “In many stories, heroes or leaders are guided by a seemingly all-knowing wind that sits in the fold of the ear. This messenger wind is often identified as Wind’s Child or Little Wind. Although there appear to be many winds, Navajo people seem to agree that these are but many names for the one Wind.”<sup>41</sup> These winds that sit in the ear give instruction, answers to questions, or predict the future; they are also the reason for hanging a feather from the ear: to show that the winds are communicating with that person.<sup>42</sup> All living things have an inner wind, including the mountains. Those inner beings can also correspond with one another.<sup>43</sup> So Wind is not only a form of communication by whispering in the ear, but also can talk with other inner winds. However, the Navajo believe that all forms of Wind, even when considered separate, are one unified Wind.

Not only is Wind used for communication, but it is also exhibited physically. The Wind People have an actual appearance, which is alluded to in the Hail Chant as having hanging curly hair.<sup>44</sup> This is depicted in many Windway sand paintings. Another way that the Navajo visibly depict the wind is through association with colors. According to Reichard,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 499.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen, A. M. “Navajo Origin Legend.” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 43, No. 167, Jan. – Mar. (American Folklore Society, 1930), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/535166>, 96.

<sup>41</sup> Gill, *Dictionary*, 217.

<sup>42</sup> Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Gill, *Dictionary*, 217.

<sup>44</sup> Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, 497.

White is the color of day, of hope, of newness, of change and commencement. The symbol of divinity, white expresses perfect ceremonial control. Blue is the color of celestial and earthly attainment, of peace, happiness, and success, of vegetable sustenance. Yellow is the symbol of blessing, of generation, of safety, of promise. Black, sinister but protective, is the color of darkness, night, confusion, smoke, omnipresence, of threat, doubt, indefiniteness, wonder, and origin, of finality.<sup>45</sup>

Manuelito Begay, a Navajo, explains that winds from certain directions have a color, and thereby a connotation, associated with them: black in the east, blue in the south, yellow in the west, white in the north.<sup>46</sup> By combining this information, connotations can be assigned to the directions. If we refer back to the real life wind, we can see that the southwest wind that “blows constantly” has a positive connotation.<sup>47</sup> It is possible that the southwestern wind aids the crops. Further geographical studies may draw more concrete conclusions on this topic.

Throughout the materials I uncovered on the depiction of *nilch'i*, Manuelito Begay's description of wind color-direction connotation is the only oral history that can be used for support. This lends the question as to why scholars place significance on the above ideas when the oral histories contain little evidence of its importance. One hypothesis is that the scholars were wrong in noting these depictions of Wind People – but that is not likely. More probably the nature of the questions asked in the oral histories did not provide the opportunity for such descriptions from Navajo people. Or, since one of the methods of depiction is sand painting, Navajo people may have felt no reason to describe the image of Wind, since it could be seen visually in the sand paintings.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 206-207.

<sup>46</sup> Manuelito Begay, interview, Tape 180, side 2, Nov. 1968. American Indian Oral History Collection (Reel Mfm 1), pg 16. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>47</sup> Hack, “Dunes,” 240.

From the conversation I had with the Navajo woman at University of New Mexico, I deduced two things: one, that all Navajo people might not know the depiction of wind. Seemingly, the oral histories I collected were of mainly ordinary Navajo citizens. The Navajo people with the most knowledge of the myths and history of their people tend to hold more important positions. Scholars, as the ones referenced above, likely had the opportunity to interview these position-holding Native Americans who likely spoke English. The oral histories I collected seemed to be of Navajo citizens that held few important positions in the tribe, and who spoke little English (some of the transcriptions had been translated or contained omitted sections with the phrase [in Navajo] in its place).

The second inference I made from the statement made by the Navajo woman at the research center is that modern Navajo people born in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries may have a different view of Navajo culture. Because the Navajo have an oral storytelling tradition, subtle changes in myths and prayers may have been made over time. No culture remains completely untouched by the changing world around it. The Navajo have encountered Western society in many forms – through forced abandonment of their land to daily visits by tourists of the American West. It is possible that their culture has been impacted by Western society's religions and technologies. We can see clearly that the technologies have reached them on the very subject of wind – via windmills. That Navajo beliefs have been changed is not unlikely – and if the existing scholarship on the Navajo does come from interactions with elder, legend-carrying, position-holding Navajo people, then perhaps scholars have been unable to see this change in the modern, everyday Navajo Indians.

## Life Wind

Not only do the Navajo assign human-like traits to Wind, but they also believe that Wind is inside all people; every person is said to have an “inner wind.” Communication between inner winds begins before birth and lasts a Navajo’s whole life. This inner wind enters the body before a baby is even born, which causes the fetus to move – showing the mother that the small wind has taken its place.<sup>48</sup> Where does the “small wind” come from? McNeley explains that the parents’ body fluids, together, create the child’s wind.<sup>49</sup> When the child is born, sometimes a prayer is said. Josh Joshie, a Navajo father, said the following prayer, “all around him in four directions he shall have a great happiness, out of his mouth-holy and good way if talking will be coming out of his voice.”<sup>50</sup> The four cardinal directions, and the Wind gods corresponding to them, are very sacred to the Navajo – so the father prays that his son will have happiness from the four directions. Talking is a process that cannot be done without Wind. Wind and breath are indistinguishable, and one must have breath in order to speak. Therefore, by the father praying for his son to be able to talk, he is praying for his son’s health. This “small wind” that enters the fetus remains with the person from birth to death and is closest to the Western world’s idea of a “soul.”

While the Navajo believe that every person has a soul, this “soul” is different than Western society’s idea of a soul. It is believed that every Navajo is born with a “wind

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<sup>48</sup> Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1977), 30.

<sup>49</sup> McNeley, *Holy Wind*, 33.

<sup>50</sup> Joe Joshie, interview, tape 340, American Indian Oral History Collection (Reel Mfm 2), pg. 4. Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

within one,”<sup>51</sup> or an inner-wind soul. This inner wind is a part of a Navajo’s ancestry: “It was the wind that gave them life. It is the wind that comes out of our mouths now that gives us life. When this ceases to blow we die. In the skin at the tips of our fingers we see the trail of the wind; it shows us where the wind blew when our ancestors were created.”<sup>52</sup> When a baby is given an inner wind at birth, it brings the child to life, giving it the ability to stand up and to grow body hair.<sup>53</sup>

But it goes beyond enabling the body; according to Witherspoon, this Wind controls the person: “People also have inner forms. These are referred to as nilch’i bii’siz’iinii, usually translated as the ‘in-standing wind soul.’ The in-standing wind soul is thought to be in control of one’s body, including one’s thoughts and actions. The ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ of a person is attributed to the nature of his wind soul.”<sup>54</sup> So, when a Navajo is born, he is born either good, bad, or somewhere in between, and he cannot be changed: “If he is happy, he cannot make himself unhappy, and if he is unhappy, he cannot become happy. Similarly, a person may be born mean and nothing can be done about him.... You cannot change a person’s inborn ‘wind.’”<sup>55</sup> The idea that a wind soul creates a good or bad person is a controversial one. If we believe this, then personal responsibility vanishes.<sup>56</sup> John Ladd finds the idea that one has an “inner wind soul” to have some consequences: that a person is born one way and cannot be changed

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<sup>51</sup> McNeley, *Holy Wind*, 33.

<sup>52</sup> Washington Matthews, translator, *Navajo Legends* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1994), 69.

<sup>53</sup> Reichard, *Navajo Religion*, 497.

<sup>54</sup> Witherspoon, *Language and Art*, 29-30.

<sup>55</sup> John Ladd, *The Structure of a Moral Code: A Philosophical Analysis of Ethical Discourse Applied to the Ethics of the Navajo Indians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 273.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

(so it can be used as an excuse), and that misconduct can be blamed on the “inner wind”.<sup>57</sup>

To demonstrate the extent to which the Navajo believe Wind has infiltrated life, Witherspoon explains that “the inner forms of various natural phenomena are humanoid. They can hear the speech of ritual and can see the movements and prestations involved in the symbolic action of ritual. These inner forms (in-lying ones) of natural phenomena also have inner forms (in-standing wind souls). Just as with the earth surface people, it is the nature or class of the in-standing wind soul that determines whether the particular Holy Person is benevolent, malevolent, or a combination of these.”<sup>58</sup> So it is, in fact, much different than the idea of a “soul,” if Witherspoon is correct. What Witherspoon is saying is actually close to the idea of holy embodiment. However, it is different because the Navajo believe in one all encompassing Wind, while it is at the same time present within each Navajo. This is perhaps the most complex element of *nilch’i*. Wind is in different people, a god, and breath all at the same time – while in the same understanding, each of these Winds are one and the same. This is very likely a contributing factor to the cursory knowledge some Navajo Indians have of Wind.

The Navajo believe that the inner wind gives life not just because it is like a soul, but also because they believe in Wind as breath. Witherspoon explains:

The ‘in-standing wind soul’ is acquired at birth and controls one’s thoughts, speech, and actions. When a person’s breath leaves them, he dies; that is, he loses the capacity to move. Without air in the body the digestive and respiratory systems cannot function, the mind cannot think, and the body cannot produce sound or movement. The body has no inherent capacity for thought, speech, or movement; it acquires these capacities from air. A baby who never receives an ‘in-standing wind soul’

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 273-274.

<sup>58</sup> Witherspoon, *Language and Art*, 35-36.

is born still and silent – without life.<sup>59</sup>

So, it can be inferred that without an inner wind, or breath, a person would die. This is how the Navajo reconcile death in their culture. For example:

Wind is the deity which furnishes the breath of life... Since sound is a part of essential breath it is not difficult to understand why hearing should be kept intact, or why the prayer should request the restoration of the voice. Quietness and immobility are symptoms of misfortune or death, hence the normal human body must manifest sound and motion.<sup>60</sup>

It is very practical and logical, while at the same time maintaining their belief system.

Witherspoon finds that the “in-standing wind soul” controls the language and thought of a person because without air we would not be able to think or speak. The Navajo redefine whether a person stops breathing because they are dead, or if they die because they have stopped breathing. In the Navajo definition, it is both.

Death is something that all cultures and peoples attempt to explain, and the Navajo effectively explain it simultaneously in a rational and religious way. It is spiritual in that “the act of breathing is in itself a very ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ thing... On inhaling, the powerful ones enter one’s lungs and are both a part of the breather as well as his being a part of and linked to all other beings.”<sup>61</sup> Because of the inner wind soul, the Navajo explain death through the inner wind soul leaving – or the breath leaving – a person. The Navajo Zonnie May Lee explains frankly: “Even if we don’t have the wind, we would choke to death, the wind, the air is the only thing that is keeping us up to live, so is the

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<sup>59</sup> Witherspoon, *Language and Art*, 54.

<sup>60</sup> Reichard, “Human Nature,” 356.

<sup>61</sup> Farella, *The Main Stalk*, 67.



water.”<sup>62</sup> The idea that air and water are essential for life is not revolutionary, but for the Navajo, it means more. The inner Wind is also thought of as the air that one breathes – and therefore when people stop breathing, their inner Winds have left them.<sup>63</sup> Reichard puts it most simply by saying, “The difference between life and death is the breath and, in a sense, breath is life itself.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, to the Navajo, Wind is life. The significance of this statement by Reichard is immense. The Navajo concept of Wind stretches from the impacts of real wind on their crops, to Wind itself defining life. Such an abstract idea taken out of context would seem absurd. But within the context of *Dinetah*, Navajo religion, Navajo imagery, and the never-ending cycle of life and death, Wind becomes all-encompassing. It is both logical and spiritual at the same time.

## Conclusion

Through all of this discussion, a clearer view of what wind means to the Navajo should be apparent. Wind, or nilch’i, is not only a natural element, but a source of power; not only a source of protection, but mischievous; not only the creator of their god, but the creator of man; not only part of a healing ritual, but the means of life; not only different colors used in sand paintings, but the sand painting itself; not only a part of birth, but mortality; and not only a means of speaking, but the means for breathing. In brief, Wind is a complex and imperative part of Navajo culture that should be accounted for when discussing the Navajo’s land, religion, images, and lives.

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<sup>62</sup> Zonnie May Lee, interview, Oct 13 &14, 1967, American Indian Oral History (Reel Mfm 1). Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico.

<sup>63</sup> Witherspoon, *Language and Art*, 54.

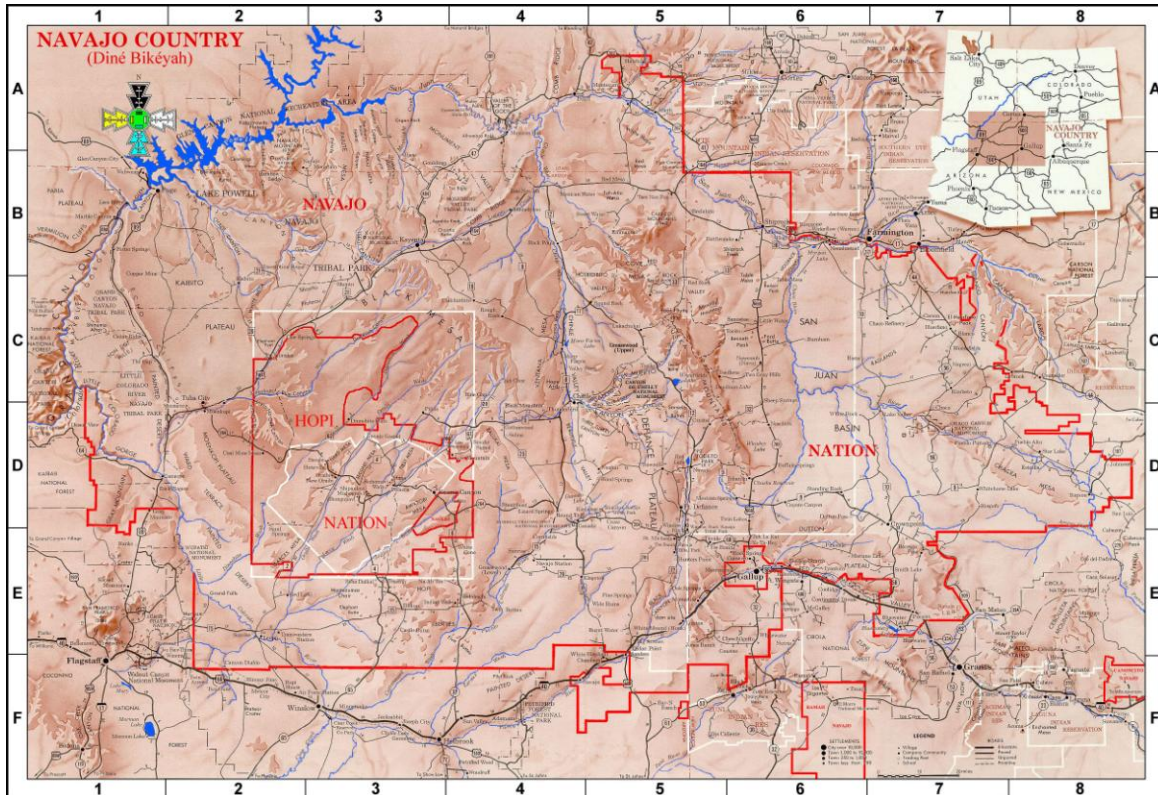
<sup>64</sup> Reichard, “Human Nature”, 355.

These aspects of Navajo tradition are noteworthy because much of Navajo scholarship places emphasis on them. To explain the Navajo to Western society while respecting the Navajo's ideals is undoubtedly a delicate charge. However, simply mentioning one of their most sacred philosophies without acknowledging its greatness is a slight to Navajo people. Wind, as it plays a prominent role in Navajo ways of thinking, should take center stage in many discussions of their way of life. We have already puzzled over the questions of depiction of Wind in oral histories versus secondary scholarship, and the possibility that Wind has had a changing definition in Navajo philosophy over time; this brings us to our final puzzle: why has there been no historiographical debate over the Navajo view of Wind? It is clear that the concept is inconsistent and unique to their culture. As an ever-changing ideology with a permanent place in their culture, Wind should pose a conundrum to historians of Navajo culture and provide a breeding ground for discussion. Navajo Wind presents historians with the opportunity to delve further into Navajo culture on a multitude of levels.

This abstract concept is difficult to summarize, but the most important and complex feature to be understood about what Wind means to the Navajo is its comprehensive nature. One can list all of the ways that Wind *and* wind impact the Navajo, but to truly understand what this implies is the challenge. Because *nilch'i* encompasses all of life in the Navajo existence, it goes beyond any normal abilities of comprehension that we would apply to Western society, or comparable cultures. Its ancient nature makes it difficult for even Navajo people to fully comprehend its extent. However, what can be taken away is this: it is important, when studying the Navajo, to understand what Wind – and for that matter, any of their own unique ideologies – mean

to *them*. As with any study of another culture, without knowledge of their ways of thinking, we are no closer to understanding their ways of life.

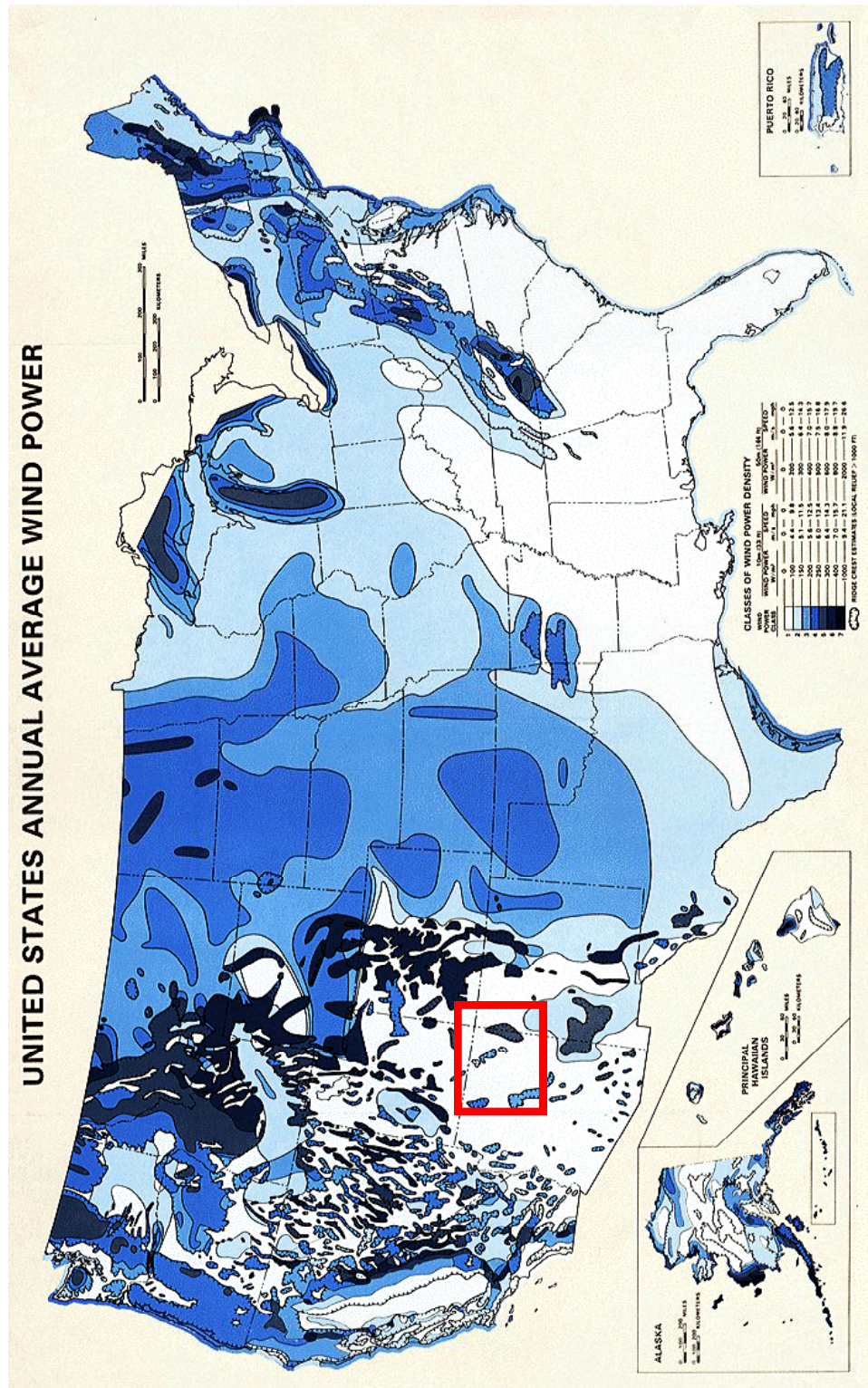
## Appendix: Maps



**Figure 1. Map of Navajo Reservation.**

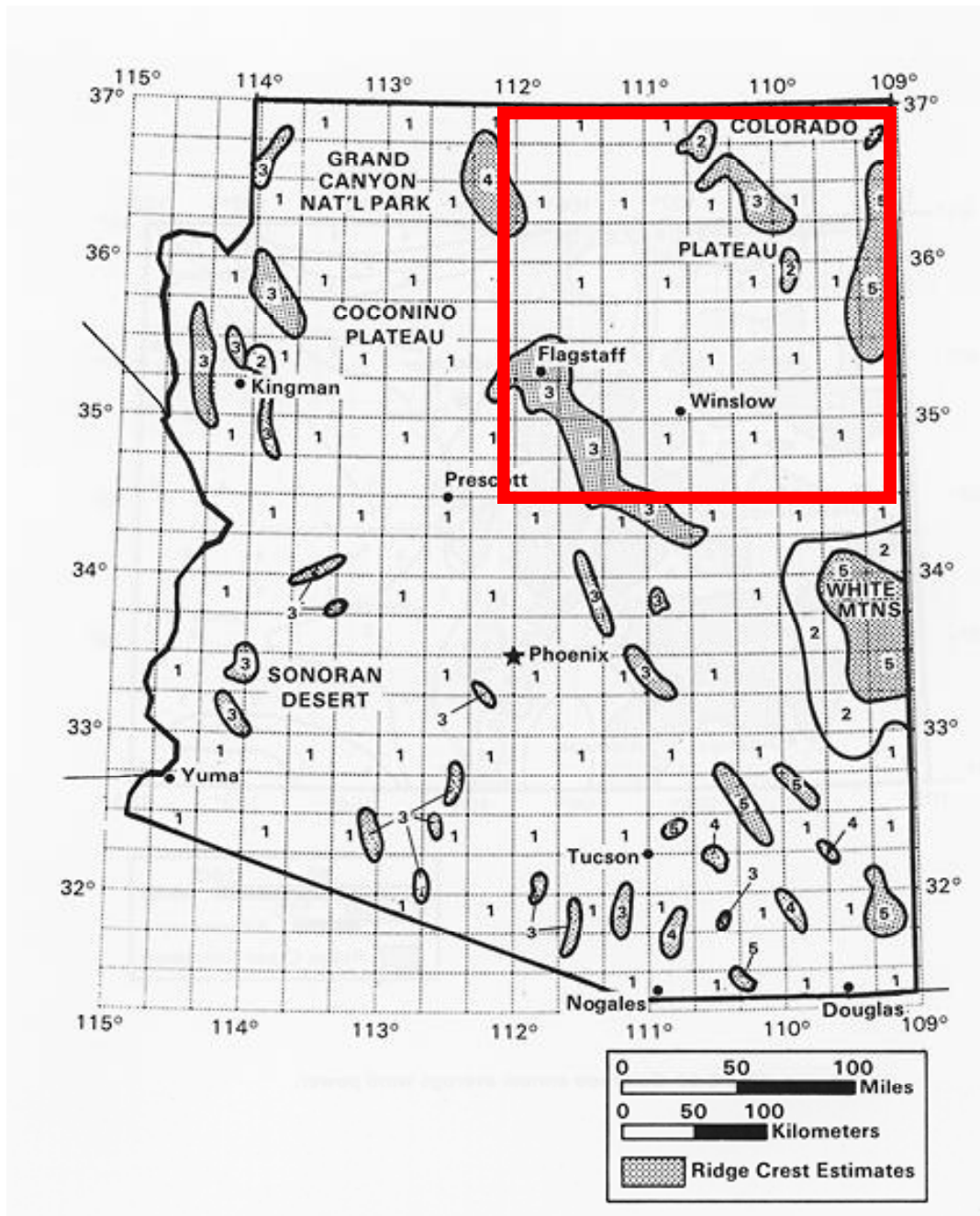
Adapted from: [http://www.lapahie.com/Navajo\\_Map\\_Lg.cfm](http://www.lapahie.com/Navajo_Map_Lg.cfm)





**Figure 2: United States Annual Average Wind Power.** The area inside the red rectangle approximately depicts the area of the Navajo reservation.

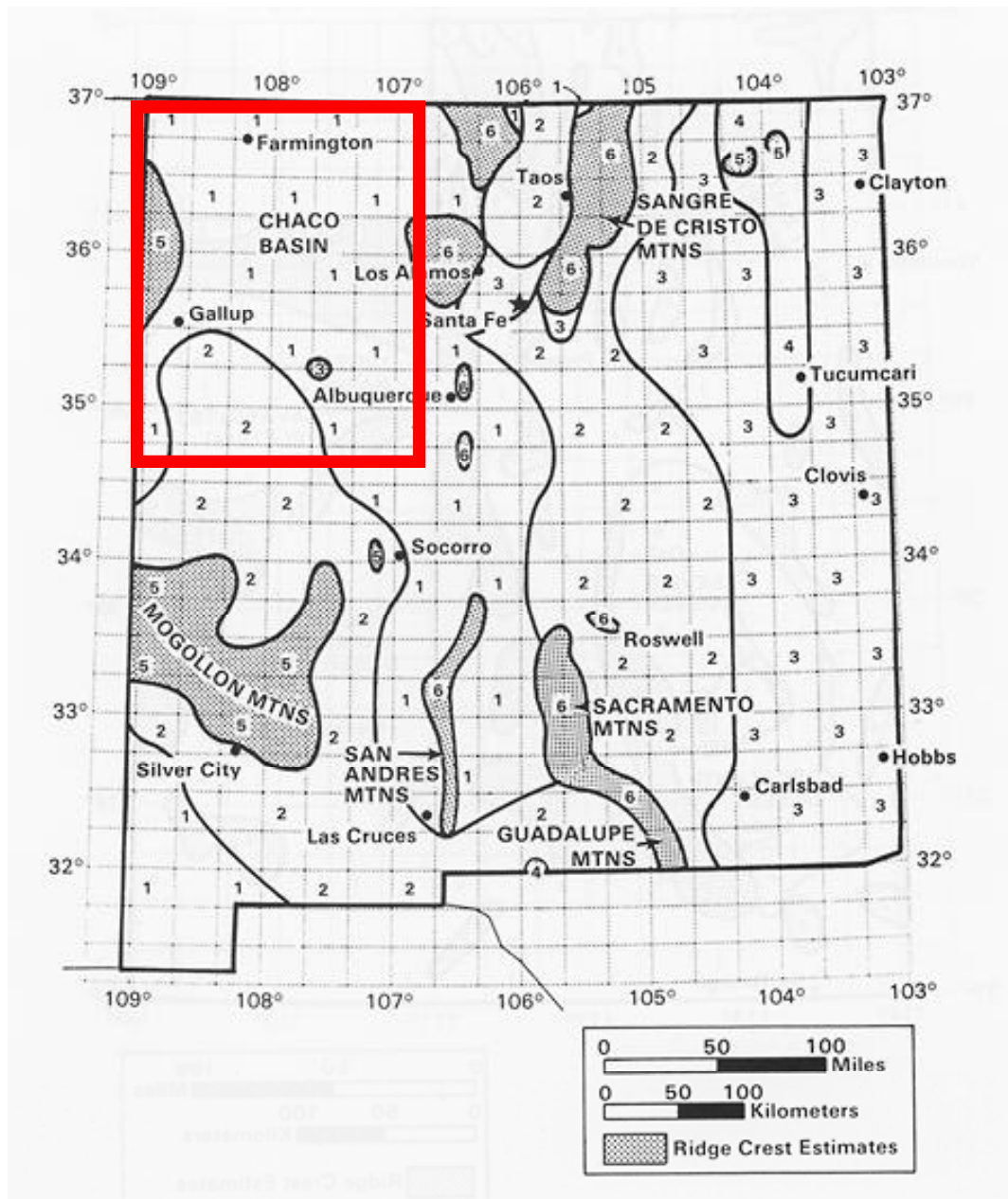
Adapted from: <http://rredc.nrel.gov/wind/pubs/atlas/maps/chap2/2-01m.html>



**Figure 3. Arizona Annual Average Wind Power. The area inside the red rectangle approximately depicts the area of the Navajo reservation.**

Adapted from: <http://rredc.nrel.gov/wind/pubs/atlas/maps/chap3/3-49m.html>





**Figure 4. New Mexico Annual Average Wind Power.** The area inside the red rectangle approximately depicts the area of the Navajo reservation.

Adapted from: <http://rredc.nrel.gov/wind/pubs/atlas/maps/chap3/3-51m.html>

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### Archival Materials

There were many typographical errors in the transcriptions of the interviews with Navajos in the University of New Mexico Southwestern History Archives. I have corrected these errors within the quotes to the best of my ability. Where I was unsure of whether it was a typographical error or misspoken, I have maintained the original text.

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